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ABSTRACT

Recent levels of naturalization have reached record highs. Since 1950, most applicants must meet strict English literacy and civics requirements. An Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) examiner evaluates the applicant's knowledge of U. S. history and government, administers a short written dictation, and conducts an oral interview. Citizenship classes are often offered within publicly-funded education programs or at community or social service organizations. The rate of low-literate learners in these classes is rising. The teacher's role is to teach about the naturalization process and the benefits of citizenship, prepare the student for the oral and written exams, empower the student, and provide referrals for legal advice. Teachers use two basic approaches to teaching citizenship: conducting a social science or civic education course, or teach only the items on the exam. Learners often enroll just before the INS interview, leaving little time to develop adequate skills. Class activities based on the exam may include: arranging the 100 INS questions by theme; class contests; information gap activities; tape recording; flash cards; dictation; role-playing; drill patterns; cloze exercises; and testing practice. A number of information sources are available to teachers. Contains 10 references. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Citizenship Preparation for Adult ESL Learners

by Thomas Nixon, Visalia Adult School, CA
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Citizenship Preparation for Adult ESL Learners

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Learning to become good citizens has been part of immigrant education throughout US history. Early in this century, for example, settlement houses established programs to help newcomers assimilate. Classes to assist immigrants through a naturalization process that includes passing the U.S. Immigrant and Naturalization Service (INS) exam are a newer phenomenon. Such classes have seen dramatic enrollment gains as record numbers of people—five million in the last five years—have become citizens (Constable, 1997). This trend is due to recent high levels of immigration, new federal laws regarding immigrants and public benefits, and immigrants' fears about anti-immigrant sentiment and where it might lead.

This digest will describe the educational requirements of the naturalization process and give English as a second language (ESL) teachers a variety of activities to use when preparing learners for the citizenship exam.

The INS Exam

Speaking English has been a requirement for citizenship since the turn of the last century, however, it was not until 1950 that strict mandates about reading and writing English became part of the naturalization requirements (Becker, 1993). Today, most applicants must meet English literacy and civics requirements, although there are some exemptions for elderly or disabled applicants.

An INS examiner evaluates the applicants' knowledge of US history and government by asking selected questions from the N-400 application and from a list of 100 questions. A short written dictation is also given. Each INS district has individual discretion over assessment of the history and civics information and some districts accept standardized tests results. However, the ability to speak and understand English must still be demonstrated in an oral interview.

Citizenship Classes

Citizenship classes are usually offered within publicly funded education programs or at community or social service organizations. These classes can be distinct courses or a series of lessons within a general ESL class. They vary in duration and emphasis and are sometimes taught bilingually. They do not always include ESL instruction.

Service providers indicate that the number of low-literate learners—some of whom have been in the United States for many years without taking language classes—is rising in citizenship classes (Becker, 1997). Many of these low-literate learners became residents in the early 1990s as part of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) which allowed undocumented immigrants to gain residency. (See Terdy & Spener, 1990.) Older and disabled immigrants, who face a possible cutoff of social services, are also attending classes in greater numbers (Rimer, 1996).

The Teacher's Role

Aliza Becker, a citizenship education consultant, stresses that teachers must distinguish between the educational and the legal aspects of citizenship preparation. It may be detrimental, for example, to encourage learners to seek citizenship before their papers are in order. Becker and Lindt (1996), describe the following elements of the citizenship teacher's role: teaching the benefits of citizenship; education about the naturalization process; preparation for the oral and written exams including teaching language skills, culture, content, test-taking strategies, and instilling confidence; empowerment; and *referrals* for legal advice. It is important that the teacher not assume the role of legal advisor, especially for applicants who have had legal problems or a lengthy absence from the United States. The teacher should be familiar with local organizations that offer free or low-cost legal assistance.

Approaches to Teaching Citizenship

Teachers use two basic approaches in teaching citizenship. The first is to teach the course as a social science or civic education course in which learners are taught historical and cultural information that may or may not be on the citizenship test. (See Pereira, 1993). General ESL instruction can be part of this approach. The other approach is to teach only those items that will be on the test. Sometimes this is done bilingually. Although learners receive a solid introduction to U.S. history and government in the first approach, it may not prepare them for the INS interview. As one teacher says, "...I agree with the notion of teaching civic participation and not the test, but... [learners are] telling me, 'Look, we have the rest of our lives to learn about the system. I really need to pass this test.' " (Fredella, 1997, pp. 4-5). In contrast, while the other approach may prepare learners for the test, it does not necessarily prepare them to be good citizens. Therefore, instructors need to take from both approaches to teach learners both what they need to know to pass the test and what they need to know to be active citizens.

Learners often enroll in classes shortly before their INS interviews, not allowing sufficient time to prepare. This is problematic, especially if the applicant has low English literacy skills. To increase mastery of the language and literacy needed to pass the exam, teachers can encourage the formation of study teams for practice outside of class.

Activities for Teaching Citizenship

Using a variety of materials in the citizenship class provides context for learners, especially those with minimal English literacy skills (Holt, 1995). Materials should be as authentic as possible. An American flag, patriotic posters, and images of the White House, Lincoln, Washington, and Martin Luther King are examples of visual aids that can help low-literate learners better understand the content.

Regardless of the learner's English proficiency and literacy level, classroom instruction must not be limited to textbook work. Following are some activities, most of which are based on the INS list of 100 questions, from which the majority of INS interview questions are

drawn. (Example: What do we call a change to the Constitution?)

Question Division - Arrange the 100 INS questions according to theme. Most of the questions fit neatly into such themes as the presidency, the Congress, or the Constitution. There will be overlap because questions will fit into more than one theme. By breaking up the questions in this manner, the teacher will be able to present neat, concise thematic units.

Contests - Many learners enjoy competition. This is particularly true for those whose home country's educational systems emphasize memorization, speed, and individual achievement. To run a contest , divide the class into teams and have the teacher ask the questions, have a learner ask the questions, or have the teams choose and ask the questions. Start with one individual and ask questions until a mistake is made, then go on to the next individual. The winner is the one who answers the most questions before making a mistake.

Information Gap Activities - Information gap activities provide learners with the opportunity to think critically. An example of an activity is to divide learners into pairs with a list of ten questions and ten answers. Have the questions numbered and the answers lettered. Using only English, have the learners match the numbers with the letters.

Tape-recording - Since it is unlikely that the INS interviewer will sound exactly the same as the teacher, learners must have opportunities to hear the questions from other native speakers of English, for example, the teacher's friends or family members. Try for a variety of accents and intonations. Alternately, have the learners collect their own samples. This will give them the opportunity to speak to a native speaker of English. A third option is to let the learners themselves read and record the questions. Although this will take a great deal of time, it will foster test familiarity.

Flash Cards - Have the learners make themselves a set of 100 question flashcards and write the answers on the back. Although this will take a lot of class time, it will allow learners to study the questions outside of class.

Dictation - Since the test requires that learners to listen to and write down one or two sentences, practicing dictation is vital. Many learners are more afraid of this particular part of the test than of any other part of the interview. Possible practice formats are: Dictate questions to the learners. Dictate answers. Dictate the questions, and then have the learners write down the answer to the question. Dictate the answers and then have the learners write down the corresponding question.

Role-play - Pretend that the teacher is the INS examiner. Create an environment in the classroom that is similar to the testing situation. Include such props as the American flag and photographs of the president.

Drill Patterns - Drill and practice can be a valuable technique for memorizing answers for the exam. Some possible drills are: a) The teacher recites a question and learners repeat the question. b) The teacher recites a question and the learners give the answer. c) The teacher recites the answer and the learners recite the question. If necessary, the teacher can break down the sentences into meaningful chunks that can be used for further practice. Pronuciation drills can be added as well. A drill that provides practice with rephrasing the question is also useful as the INS examiner may do so during the interview.

Cloze Exercises - Hand out worksheets with some text deleted. Possible high-level texts are the *Star-spangled Banner*, the *Pledge of Allegiance*, or the *Preamble to the Constitution*. The teacher can also have learners read aloud a passage from a history book or recite one from memory. Write it on the chalkboard. Erase every fifth word. Have the class read it filling in the missing words.

Testing Practice - Teach learners how to sign up for and take the written test. (This could include a field trip to the local INS office.) Make sure that learners know how to take multiple choice tests and provide opportunities for practice (Silliman 1997). Practice versions of the standardized tests are available from several publishers.

Resources

Most citizenship texts on the market are not of a level that will be accessible to low-level learners (Silliman, 1997). In fact, according to Aliza Becker (personal communication, June, 1997), available texts often "require a much higher level of literacy than is needed for the test and totally leave out the English language skills needed for the interview." Teachers will need to adapt materials for these learners. The following are some general resources:

Teachers can visit the INS World Wide Web site at http://www.ins.usdoj.gov to download or order forms, receive updates about the citizenship tests, and read the answers to frequently asked questions (FAQ's).

The 100 test questions on US history and government are included in many textbooks and are available through many INS district offices.

The Immigrant Legal Resource Center (1663 Mission St., Suite 602, San Francisco, CA 94103) publishes citizenship materials focussed on the legal process.

A video resource for teachers and learners, "The INS Interview: Will They Pass?" (Available from Miller Educational Materials, 1-800-636-4375.), shows dramatized citizenship interviews and asks viewers to discuss and decide whether selected people will pass.

Conclusion

It is becoming increasingly evident that, to succeed in the United States and to have access to the full range of government sponsored services, immigrants need to become citizens. The ESL/citizenship teacher can play an important role by helping learners achieve the English language skills and content knowledge they need to take and pass the citizenship exam.

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